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New Home Concept Moves Forward

By Sophie Braccini

Imagine a net-zero energy home perched on an impossibly hilly site, melting into the trees as lichen and moss organically grow on it and protect it. The latest dream of Lafayette architect James Wright for a Donald Drive property is certainly not your standard suburban home, but the members of Moraga's Design Review Board (DRB) who reviewed the plans last week were very taken with the concept and recommended the project move forward, as long as the Fire Department does not ask the owner to cut down all the trees that will shield the new home.

The 4,270.50 square foot single-family, three-level residence on a vacant 13,203 square foot hillside parcel adjoins the Hacienda de las Flores. A circular bridge driveway off of Donald Drive will lead to the garage on the upper level. The different levels of the home will step down the hillside. A 2,647 square foot middle, or mezzanine, level will be the main living area with a cantilevered back deck; the 1,278 square foot lower level will include two bedrooms and two bathrooms. Construction requires a hillside development permit because the slope of the hillside is approximately 54 percent.

"This is a very eco-friendly home," said Wright. "The materials we are using include reclaimed redwood and multi-color slate." One energy efficient innovation proposed for this house is the construction of a thermal cistern that uses water to cool the house in summer and warm it in winter.

Neighbors have voiced concerns about the massiveness of the house that's 45 feet from the lowest point to the highest. "The building is actually behind the oak trees," said Wright. "The living roof is a rainscreen roof where moss and lichen will grow. This house belongs to the trees, it belongs in the woods." Wright added that the trees inspired the design and that is why all the sidings will be made of redwood. One neighbor came to the DRB meeting to express his opposition to the project. "You will be able to see this house from far, far away, even from Moraga Road," he said. "This project would change the hillside, there's nothing similar in Moraga; it would be something new. Eco-friendly - top, but somewhere else."

A few hours before the meeting, former Moraga mayor Lynda Deschambault sent the Board a letter detailing her concerns about this project. Among them are the instability of the site - a property nearby slid during construction; the project's proximity to open space; the fact that the General Plan suggest that homes should meet the character of their neighborhood.

DRB members were nonetheless seduced by the project. "This is a fantastic design," said DRB member, and architect, Allen Sayles. "It is a very creative project," added DRB Member John Zhu. "I could almost see in very short time the whole thing blending into its surroundings. It will melt away," said Zhu. "Because of the materials used, the house will disappear," agreed DRB Member Gerald Kirkpatrick. "This house is pushing the limit, and I can support it."

The Board noted that although existing oak trees will hide the house during the day it might be more visible at night when light will shine through the many windows of the facade.

They also know that the Fire Marshal could require a sizeable defensible space around this home. "If the Fire Marshal wants to cut most of the shielding trees around the house, the visual impact will be very different and we will want to see the project again before it proceeds to the Planning Department," said Sayles.

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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